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C O N F I D E N T I A L CARACAS 003215

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SUBJECT: FRANCISCO ARIAS CARDENAS' OUTLOOK ON CHAVEZ AND VENEZUELA

Classified By: Abelardo A. Arias, Political Counselor, for Reason 1.4(d)

Summary

1. (C) Former Zulia State Governor, Francisco Arias Cardenas, told the Ambassador on October 14 that President Hugo Chavez's antagonism had served Chavez well in the past, but he was now looking to improve relations with the U.S. Arias asserted that the President would not let the differences escalate to those the U.S. has with Cuba. However, Arias said, Chavez would react with aggression to any criticism from the U.S. government, because he assumes the U.S. intends to destroy his government. Arias, who is again running for governor of Zulia State, also claimed that the upcoming regional elections would redefine the political face of Venezuela in Chavez's favor, with the opposition's mistakes costing its candidates dearly. End Summary.

2. (C) The Ambassador and Poloff met October 14 with Francisco Arias Cardenas, a candidate for governor in the western border oil state of Zulia. Arias, an ex-army officer who also participated in the 1992 coup attempt with President Hugo Chavez, brought Jorge Garrido, Secretary General of the Union political party that Arias founded.

Chavez's Mentality

3. (C) The Ambassador told Arias he believed many people were awaiting the outcome of the presentation of his credentials for an indication of future U.S.-Venezuelan relations. Arias asserted that Chavez's antagonism towards the U.S. had served him in the past, but he was now looking to improve relations while maintaining respect and dignity. Chavez, he said, would prefer not to let the confrontation escalate to the same level that Castro has with the U.S. The Ambassador asked if Chavez would be able to manage pragmatic collaboration on some topics even though the U.S. would continue to disagree with him on regional issues and democratic institutions. Arias responded that Chavez is paranoid about U.S. intention to destroy him, and those fears will be reconfirmed by those around him at the first sign of disagreement or criticism from the U.S. Chavez's paranoia will cause him to react aggressively, Arias asserted. Arias said it might be helpful if the Ambassador specifically pointed out to Chavez that a disagreement was not an attack, and that on a wider scale many topics existed on which the two countries could cooperate.

Political Outlook

4. (C) Arias asserted that the upcoming regional elections would redefine the political face of Venezuela in Chavez's favor. The big opposition political parties, he said, will lose most of the races. The opposition parties lost their way and need to be rational and accept that some of Chavez's ideas are good, Arias asserted, while still rejecting authoritarian, centralist and anti-democratic tendencies. The "missions", especially the Cuban doctors and teachers, are making a big impact on the people, Arias said. Chavez has control of many institutions now, Arias noted, and in the next two years those who oppose him will lose more and more of their resources. Arias said he foresaw Chavez being re-elected in 2006, thus maintaining power for the next eight years. There are no alternatives that opposition parties can offer, Arias asserted. Miranda State Governor Enrique Mendoza, he said, suffered a big defeat with the referendum, and will likely be defeated again. Arias also asserted that Manuel Rosales, the current Zulia state governor running for reelection against Arias, would not be a possible leading political figure since he is likely to be convicted of treason for the April 2002 events regardless of whether he wins or loses the regional election.

Boarder Issues

15. (C) Arias said kidnapping and paying "protection money" to criminals and guerrillas is common in Zulia State. He said drugs and drug trafficking were a problem, but now there was no way to identify how extensive the problem was because there were no satellite images or inspections by the armed forces. The people are afraid to confront the Colombian problem directly, Arias said, and the local, regional and national governments compete rather than cooperate, so no one addressed border problems or crime.

Comment

16. (C) Francisco Arias Cardenas' insight into Chavez's mentality was interesting given their past connection in the military service and the 1992 coup attempt. Arias, a former governor of Zulia state who lost to Manuel Rosales, had reasonable predictions about the political outlook, but of course, he is not completely unbiased, particularly with regards to his rival Rosales.
McFarland

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